Interviewer: David Frederiksen
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Pender County Oral History Project

Mary Bowen Caputo: A History in the Voice of its People

In this interview Mrs. Caputo discusses her love and connection to the town of Burgaw North Carolina. She shares her passion for genealogy and history, retelling her grandfather's experience as a private in the Confederate States Army, and shares stories about two prominent families in Pender County North Carolina and their contributions. Mrs. Caputo also recalls stories about what it was like living in a large family, reflecting on the role the church played in her life, alongside how communication has changed over time.

Topics discussed include growing up in a large family with many cousins, church revivals, family history, genealogy, local history, communication changes, and life during World War Two.

*Interviews were conducted as research for the book Pender County, a History in the Voice of its People.

David Frederiksen: Testing 123 testing—

[00:00:35]

Mary Bowen Caputo: What do you want to know? [unclear]

[00:00:37]

Frederiksen: Yea, sure—I mean, you know, you've been around the world. You've been an officer's wife. You've been a diplomat. You know, you're a journalist—I mean you got—I mean those are really some top honors there. I mean—you know—I wouldn't underestimate that. Yeah, I'm kind of curious why you came back.

[00:01:00]

Caputo: Well, I grew up here and I'm—with lots of cousins. And I left Burgaw, I married a Marine Officer, within a year after my graduation from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill School of Journalism. My career as a newspaper reporter was cut short when I married a marine, but I've never, never—[laughs]—

[00:01:25]

Frederiksen: [unclear].

[00:01:27]

Caputo: Never regretted that, at all. We had a wonderful life; my husband was in the Marine Corps for almost thirty years. And I found that every time he went to war, that was World War Two, Korea, Vietnam, and each time he went to war, I came back to Burgaw. So, I had never lost my contact with Burgaw. After he retired from the Marine Corps, he went into business for about twelve years. We were living in Atlanta, and I thought, we need to put down roots. We really needed to settle down, our children were both grown and had finished college. And the more we

thought about it, the more we thought Burgaw was the place for us. So, of all places that we've ever been, including Sweden, Hawaii, all up and down the East Coast, some [unclear] in the West Coast. Many places we decided that Burgaw suit us better than anything else. And we are delighted that we made that choice. We moved here thirty-three years ago and have become very active in the community. My interest is genealogy and local history. I had never really done very much about that until we came here. Then I realized that my roots in Pender County go so deeply that this was the place that I could really find out most of the things I needed to know.

The historical—Pender County historical society was founded in 1951, it became inactive for a few years and then came back to life in 1971. With a lot of people who were interested in local history, interested in preserving it, 1975 Pender County celebrated its 100th anniversary. That brought out a lot of things that nobody had thought about before—every community in Pender County to have a day, when they were featured. They had a big celebration. All of the local people—brought out, everything that they could think of that might be of interest and that sparked the idea—we need a museum. These things that were brought out papers, clothes, [unclear] letters, artifacts of every kind had been tucked away in a class [unclear] or somewhere. But when each community celebrated its day, these things were brought out—that everybody was interested in. Then in 1979, Burgaw celebrated its 100th anniversary, and the same thing happened again. Everybody was interested in what had happened before.

So, the opportunity presented itself—two lovely kind ladies, who had grown up in this house, which is now the Pender County Museum, had been schoolteachers. They were no longer able to travel between Burgaw and Florida, so they wanted to get rid of this house. And we talked them in—or suggested, that perhaps they would like to donate this house for a museum, which they did. So, the Pender County Historical society was very fortunate in obtaining this place. And this has been my main interest ever since the museum was opened in December of 1979. And we've been given many, many wonderful artifacts. And we continue to grow. We're always short of help, as all volunteer organizations are. But we keep going. My interest also is in genealogy, and I was able to get a lot of information about my grandfather, who was—as I claim—the only enlisted man in the Confederate States Army.

Everybody else I've ever heard of who had an ancestor in the—during the Civil War was—their relative was either general nevertheless, from a colonel, but I have proof that my grandfather was a private. So, I think that is really a great claim to fame, if he was the only one. I have most [unclear] showing that he was captured, he was slightly wounded, and captured at Spotsylvania on May the 12th 1864 and sent to Elmira New York, as a prisoner of war. I have done a lot of research; I've been to Elmira. I've done a lot of reading and a lot of visiting cemeteries, libraries, courthouses to get facts as I can, and I have written a book about that. My family, because of—I think mainly because my interest in my grandfather. My main work since we've been here has been with the museum, with my church St. Mary's Episcopal Church. I've held every job there except Rector [laughs].

[00:07:25]

Frederiksen: Wonderful, wonderful! [laughs].

[00:07:27]

Caputo: It's been one of the loves of my life. I've also been on the lower Cape Fear hospice endowment fund board, I worked as a hospice volunteer, as a law—law that—reading tutor, I've been a resource person for the local schools, and all of it I enjoyed thoroughly. I think that the main

thing that we can do as we grow older is to give younger people some idea of what can be done, what one individual can do for their community.

[00:08:08]

Frederiksen: What would you say, with respects to your duties here—and just really you're throwing yourself into this museum—what would you say is one of the highlights of Pender history of all the literature that you've perused and reviewed, all the pictures, all the stories you've heard—what would you say is that, you know, real highlights, or a few of the highlights of Pender history.

[00:08:34]

Caputo: One of the things that impressed me most is, there have been two families who have long, long histories connected to Pender County. Of course, it was New Hanover County until 1875, but these two families have given the Pender County Museum most of the valuable artifacts that we own. That was the Banner family and the Armstrong family from Rocky Point. We've been given a number of old newspapers, some dating back as far as 1858, local papers, I think the earliest one of the local papers was 1889; and these are just intriguing when you read, having studied journalism at Carolina, it's amazing to see the difference in style. Just delightful to read some of the early accounts, very flowery language, very descriptive, and when you read an article, particular about a wedding or a party, that you feel as though you've been there. Today, things are cut and dried and we don't go into nearly as much description, but these things are delightful. Nowadays, no one has time to write that type of thing ultimately is [unclear].

[00:09:56]

Frederiksen: Well, you know, it's one of those things I wanted to do with this narrative discussion of some of the other narratives of other publications that have come from this press. And they're very good about, recalling the date and maybe a little bit of exposition that sets up for that kind of the person giving the story. But I told somebody that, you know, I really want people to feel as though they've been dependent. And I think that, certainly, my abilities as a technician, as a writer will afford that. I think, you know, some people say they get lost in details and description, but I don't think that there have been any substitute for what you just said so eloquently, like I had been there. I don't know if that's a modern thing with journalism, I've never went to a school of journalism, so I can't really say. But I do recall, you know, areas where I mean, you felt like you were there. Now, it's kind of like a city budget.

[00:10:54]

Caputo: Thanks, very important, but they really are not as interesting as the little details, everyday details and that's what we found here. It's not just the big, magnificent artifacts that we have, but some of the everyday things that people give us. Clothing, from the depression years, that type of thing that people don't think about.

[00:11:22]

Frederiksen: What more could you say, of the Bannerman and Armstrong families or contributions to Pender County. I know you talked about the bible is like abandoned and stable [?]—[consider this to be?]—

[00:11:34]

Caputo: The Bannerman were a very prominent family. They lived in the [unclear], there was an area a little place called Bannermans, they had a post office, as do most communities. And later it was called Bannermen breach. They have a very large plantation. They were a large family, had been prominent in many areas. One of the things that we were given from that family, is the family Bible, which records not only all of the statistics about the family, but also about the slaves, which is an unusual thing, the family's values. They gave us an original land grant. They did in the 19th year of our independence, and in the year of our Lord 1794.

[00:12:36]

Frederiksen: I mentioned that in my—in my column—

[00:12:43]

Caputo: The Armstrong family from Rocky Point, were very prominent, there were so many people in that family name, T.J. Armstrong—I don't know how many generations they are—were. The only one that I'm sure about—the only one I can remember—was called T.J. Armstrong, Jr. But he was at least the fourth member of that family by that name. We have his diploma from the University of North Carolina, class of 1909.

[00:13:18]

Frederiksen: T.J. stood for?

[00:13:20]

Caputo: Thomas, I'm not sure whether it's Thomas James—I don't think it was Thomas Jefferson. I'm not sure. I don't think we have there—Oh, he's on our radio.

[00:13:35]

Frederiksen: That's fine, yeah. Bannerman and Armstrong families, respectively, in their influence in the lower Cape Fear region, specifically, Pender County. And I think you left off me—oh—yes—for TJ Armstrong.

[00:13:48]

Caputo: I know it was Thomas, but I'm not sure where the middle was James—

[00:13:52]

Frederiksen: How many generations there were of those names.

[00:13:54]

Caputo: Same name, same name.

[00:13:58]

Frederiksen: How about the characteristics of those families and how they came to—kind of, personify Pender County.

[00:14:04]

Caputo: Well, they were big landowners, both families, and owned a lot of land and had [unclear] large families and were prominent in the civic life, if you can call county [?] life city, but prominent

in politics. Also, I'm not sure about whether or not they held public office, I think most of them did. But they were well educated. Very helpful as far as schools, that type of thing—very—just good people, good and honest and very religious. And just good citizens all around. Unfortunately, both of those families died out, there were no direct descendants left, the last direct descendant of the Bannerman family died about six years ago. But he and his wife had given the museum the—real—the majority of the really fine artifacts that we have here. Papers, deeds, letters, some civil war letters, that land grant I mentioned earlier, just clothing, pictures, everything imaginable.

The Armstrong family give us a lot of things also, a lot of furniture that was given by the foster son of T.J. Armstrong, Jr—and put Jr. in quotes, because he was way down the line, but he's the one who graduated from Carolina in 1909. His foster son gave us a pistol that had been given to one of the Armstrong men, when he was a little boy, he had led the Confederate group of soldiers around union encampment, that way had saved their lives—saved them from being captured and in appreciation, an officer gave this pistol to the little boy, and we have that here. We have just innumerable things—in both cases, in both the Bannerman and Armstrong family, children died at very early ages. We have one item from each of those families, a tea set from the Armstrong family, and a silver cup from the Bannerman family, both belonging to little girls who only lived ten years.

[00:17:06]

Frederiksen: [I knew?]. You were saying, the other day, Mary when you bring you children into tours, they can't believe that.

[00:17:11]

Caputo: Well, one of the first thing when I was telling a group of young school children about this and I said, "this tea set belonged to a little girl who only lived to be ten years old," an the question from one children was "who shot her?" Because children are not aware that youngsters used to die of diseases, the common diseases that everybody had. But now, they're inoculations against them, and it's rare to hear if a child died, at that age, unless they are in an accident. But children today think that, if you—if a child dies, they either were killed in an automobile accident, or they were shot.

[00:17:55]

Frederiksen: I think in some ways that, you know, death has become kind of a distraction for most because, we don't—we're not confronted with it, where we see illness and sickness and disease on a daily basis. You don't see people, you know, hurt accidentally because they go to the hospital. So, I know from my generation, you know, I mean—you feel invincible as an adolescent, but I think, even in modern times more because that's so much on the periphery—with exception of dying parents or grandparents, we really don't have much death.

[00:18:26]

Caputo: Well, I had three brothers who died. One was that month before his third birth, they died [?] of appendicitis and twin—boys died, when they were two years and three months old, of colitis. And they died—the twins died on the same day, eight months after the older brother had died. That was not so uncommon, because if you go into old cemeteries, you can often find seven or eight or nine infant graves from the same family, ranging from children who were stillborn or died by the time they were two or three years old. I've seen many—on the marine base, that have been shown—when they moved so many of the family cemeteries into one central location, it's very common to see six or more infant grave in one family.

[00:19:26]

Frederiksen: And then they [?] may have had six children live on a good offer [?]. You know your—[your offer your favor?].

[00:19:33]

Caputo: There was one family, in place around Pender County, who had five children who died within six weeks. I think that was from [unclear]. That was before 1900.

[00:19:52]

Frederiksen: Can you imagine that? How broken your head?

[00:19:57]

Caputo: That's one reason people have so many children out there, I guess.

[00:20:00]

Frederiksen: Yes exactly—natural selection—[both unclear]

[00:20:09]

Caputo: He sat on his front porch and his house is still standing on Walker Street in Burgaw, and I remember many, many times as a child, I had friends who lived in that neighborhood, and this was—oh—Mr. T.J. Bradshaw, and he sat on his porch all summer. We would all, often playing in the neighborhood and would always speak to him, and he would wave, because I've never had a long conversation with him. But it's a matter of fact, his grandson died the day before yesterday. His house is still standing and the older house, where the Bradshaws lived just outside of Burgaw is still standing. It's been changed, modernized a great deal, but it's still there. But he had a white beard, he was tall and thin, and just a very nice man. Always in church every Sunday, had a large family, his first wife died—I think they had three children. We have a picture of Mr. Bradshaw and his second wife, with all the children—children from his first wife and also his second wife. But my grandfather was a Civil War Veteran. So many people say no, that can't be, it must have been your great grandfather, but it was not. It was my grandfather. And he's the first person I'm going to try and see when I get to heaven. He died before I was born. So, one of my first things is going to be, to see him and also see my little brother, he died before I was born. I told you about my grandfather, right? I was going to meet him in heaven.

[00:22:26]

Frederiksen: Yes, exactly. We all sort of ran around [unclear]—So about your work here in the museum, again, how long have you been working?

[00:22:16]

Caputo: I started—before the museum opened, as soon as the building was given to the Historical Society. And then—this is a wonderful building; it was a private home. There was no central heating or air—everything needed repairing. We were very fortunate, people were interested in the museum, and we taught a lot of people into donating money—a lot of people into donating time, and we brought it up to date. Several years later, we had a complete overhaul with the electronic system, everything imaginable. But I have—I've been on the board of directors, until the last two years. [Out there on?] the board of directors, I had some office in the Historical Society, which

owns and operates all these years, but I still serve those things. And just whatever I hear—[I have found?] every inch of this money, I've gone to everybody in town. Written to everybody that I have known, with any connection with Pender County. Telling them about the museum and what a wonderful facility it is, and how much I know they would enjoy it and appreciate if they were to see it, please come and visit. And in the meantime, if you would like to contribute, feel free [laughs]. And my main project right now is getting the tapes that were made in our Pender County, World War Two veterans transcribed [unclear], which are wonderful, but we also need them to be in print, so that a lot of people would greatly prefer reading that type of thing, then they would listen to the tapes. And we are—that is underway now. And we're very fortunate in having people contribute to that. So—

[00:24:35]

Frederiksen: What kind of—in terms of kind of just, [you know?], more loosely kind of sentimental—what kind of images come to your mind from your childhood and, you know, romantic images? What kind of introduce [?]—I mean, just the warm side of living in Pender County? I mean, you've seen so much.

[00:24:52]

Caputo: Well, I had a lot of cousins. I grew up on my grandfather's estate with twenty-three first cousins, that was just a small portion. We all lived in the same neighborhood, the original house that my grandfather built around 1880, two of his sons built to the east of that house, two sons built to the west of that house. And there were twenty-three first cousins living there surrounding the old home place where our maiden at, who taught school for thirty-five years lived, but I had all forty-seven first cousins on my father's side, and forty-two of us had the same last name. But it was a large family, a interesting family, everybody in the family liked to talk. Several of the—three of the brothers had moved to Florida in the 1920s, and they would come back frequently to visit, and I can remember evening sitting on the front porch, in rocking chairs and hearing the older people talk—when I was growing up, children really were seen and not hard, but I learned a lot because I listen to all these tales, that the oldest member of that family would come up and visit and talk incessantly. But the stories that they told were wonderful—

[00:26:36]

Frederiksen: Time—[unclear]—

[00:26:38]

Caputo: I wanted to talk about, about growing up and about their father. But one of the things that they talked about was religion. And those were the days when the radio was in its infancy. There was no television, of course, no movies in this area. And one of the big entertainments I think was the church. And every church, or the three out of the Baptist, Presbyterian Methodist churches had revivals every year and they would invite list and minister to come and give a series of sermons, usually a week. And many of them had both morning services and evening services, and this doesn't sound really nice, but it was really more entertaining than—

[00:27:33]

Frederiksen: The early televangelists.

[00:27:34]

Caputo: Yea, right.

[00:27:37]

Frederiksen: Weeklong kind of [unclear]—

[00:27:40]

Caputo: Churches. That would be in the churches. But one year, I had written this in my own book, the thing that I'm writing now, the Presbyterian Church had invited visiting evangelist, and his reputation spread so rapidly. So well, that he was such a dynamic speaker, the church could no longer hold the congregation. And they had to move it to the school, the high school auditorium, which was enormous, and it was filmed pretty much. But this was in the days when they preached hellfire and damnation.

[00:28:22]

Frederiksen: Surely did—

[00:28:22]

Caputo: They did! [laughs]. This man, I think, was the champion of all, and the success of revival, stands on the number of people who decided to join the church. That would be everybody that didn't appeal just to the presbyteries, because most of the people would go to the About Us at all the churches to be entertained.

[00:28:51]

Frederiksen: Sure, no, I think it's here to stay for rhetoric, and charisma, and some of the stuff he—

[00:28:57]

Caputo: It's just, it's just entertainment. I mean, there was nothing yet. And that—when my novel [?] that when [?] My uncle would come up from Florida. And he and our family would talk about different preachers they had heard and critique them, not so much criticizing, but really critiquing them. Yes, and content and then acting on his will say, if you ever hear a really good preacher, write me word I want to hear about it. This was—Uncle—who had beautiful handwriting. He would write to my father frequently on a penny postcard, and he could put more on that postcard than most people could write on five pages. But I have so many warm memories of growing up with all these cousins and of course, friends in town. Those are the days when children could stay on the courthouse square—that—the courthouse that preceded the present one was—had just one step up from the sidewalk, and it had marble floors. The children, I can remember well as a child, staying at the courthouse we would stand up in the front door, jump up, stay all the way through and out the back door. And nobody ever chastises us. We never caused any harm. We never bothered anybody. And that was just the way it was, with escape into these stores downtown and—

[00:30:40]

Frederiksen: Without—your—penalty?

[00:30:43]

Caputo: Yeah, absolutely. But children behaved in a small town, everybody knew everybody's children, and no one there just misbehaved because—if they did anything mischievous, before they

could get home, the word had already gotten to their parents. Everybody sort of looked out for everybody else. That was the days when front porches were in vogue. There was no air conditioning, nobody was inside watching soap operas, they were all in the afternoons. All the ladies were sitting on the front porch and watching the children playing on the sidewalk riding bicycles, tricycles or skating or whatever, people visited a lot. And it was a very, very warm, warm community.

[00:31:34]

Frederiksen: Really, I mean, I [guess it?] the southerners love to talk and they love to swap stories. That was probably the original internet, and people [would talk?]. What's the purpose—it had information was relayed.

[00:31:47]

Caputo: That's true, but it's so different, nowadays, because everybody's inside, where it's air conditioned and a lot of people are watching television, and there's no visiting anymore. That was one of the big things—everyone of my mother and all of her friends were properly dressed in the afternoon, they either called on their friends, or they were at home, to receive callers. That's just, that's just the way life was, slow, and easy, and pleasant. The days when my father was clerk of court, have office in the courthouse, and after school if I stayed in the state with my friends; father would give me a nickel, and I could go to the grocery store and treat all of my friends. I could buy enough candy—

[00:32:42]

Frederiksen: For a nickel?

[00:32:46]

Caputo: You could get lots of penny candy and there was some little things, you could [?] get two or three—I think [unclear] chocolate babies or something, you could get two for a penny, and I could treat all of my friends for nickel. And if fathers out of the office, I would go to the grocery store in charge, I think that's what he did—

[00:33:11]

Frederiksen: A little surprise at the end of the month [laughs]. What would you say in my closing question, the biggest, most dramatic, change from the once upon a time, to now, what would you say? In your lifetime?

[00:33:28]

Caputo: Communication?

[00:33:30]

Frederiksen: Communication?

[00:33:31]

Caputo: Absolutely.

[00:33:32]

Frederiksen: That's interesting.

[00:33:35]

Caputo: I grew up with telephone or party line, there were five parties who shared one line. And each person, each residence, had a distinct ring and a different ring. And nowadays, you can contact anybody, anybody in the world with a little device that you carry around in your pocket. But I—during World War Two, when my husband was overseas and—the only we could communicate for more than two years was by letters. And sometimes I'd go for a month or six weeks without hearing from him, and then I'd get several letters together and the same applied to him. And our baby was born—four months after he went overseas and she was two years old, when he first saw her and he didn't—she was two weeks old before he knew she had arrived.

[00:34:41]

Frederiksen: That's amazing! That, that you could go without word from your spouse in a warzone and—

[00:34:47]

Caputo: The only time—

[00:34:48]

Frederiksen: Most of the time—

[00:34:49]

Caputo: We would here—the funny thing is that our movie theaters had news reels, but hacker [?] realized that the news reels were, at least, two weeks older, sometimes more than that. And the newspapers, but censorship was very strict in those days, all the mail that came into the this from the service man overseas, was censored. My husband, being an officer, was one of the sensors, that was one of the duties that he had. But many people receive letters that, a lot, were literally cut out their words that would give way any information as to where troops were stationed, or what was going on—that would be cut out of the letters. So, you—people would get a letter that looked like a piece of lace.

[00:35:41]

Frederiksen: With people who need somebody's permission, yeah?

[00:35:47]

Caputo: But uh—leaving—I came back to Burgaw when my husband went overseas, as I said, every time he went to war, but the first time was during World War Two. So many of my friends were in the same circumstances, their husbands had gone down to war, and so many of us came back to live with our families or be close to families. It was—it was a happy time. People—you know—of course, were concerned about the war, but everybody was in the same boat. I never heard anybody criticize, the fact that we were in the war, that our President had declared war, rationing was very, very strict. Everything was rationed. [But I don't remember?] ever hearing anyone complain—one—elderly man jokingly said that the only thing he resented was not being able to get enough coffee, and he figured that some solider somewhere would be perfectly willing for him to have his coffee, because it was more important [chuckles]. But that was just—he was

joking about it, people did not complain. We didn't have—we didn't have enough of anything really—

[00:37:02]

Frederiksen: [That probably holds?] anti-patriotic sentiment.

[00:37:06]

Caputo: Everybody was patriotic, everybody was behind the soldiers, everybody did what they could—the letter writing. I have—I have all the letters that I received from my husband during World War Two, and he would write every time he could. The only thing I knew that was—but he was in the Pacific. I had no idea of where [unclear]—I knew that was from the address to which I wrote was fleet post office, San Francisco, which obviously would say that he was in the Pacific. And my brother, who was in the army, had an APO, Atlantic post office and he was in Europe. My brother was a captain in the army and landed on Normandy D Day, and was wounded six days later, but survived and was also in Korea during that conflict. But every family was touched. I don't know of any family who had sons who didn't have somebody in the service.

[00:38:21]

Frederiksen: What would reflect the situation [unclear]. Thank you.